

Great Expectations

Gen Z and the Path to True Content Personalization



For Gen Z, brand experiences are **personal**. Interactions with colleges and universities should be, too.

Higher ed marketers know that trying to appear cool to teens usually comes across as trying too hard. But it is possible to learn from the brands they think are cool. YouTube, Netflix, and Google are considered the top three coolest companies by Generation Z, according to a **Google study**. Chrome and Amazon also rank high.

From a customer experience point of view, these brands feature something that holds great promise for admissions professionals—along with seemingly great complexity: personalization.

Think about it. Open Netflix and you're prompted to pick up on the episode or movie you left off on. It remembers you. YouTube queues up videos based on what you've watched. It knows your interests. Google something on your phone (**the device teens use more than any other**) and results related to your location show up.

For teens whose whole lives have been digital, there's nothing amazing about this. They expect it. Why should interactions with colleges and universities be any different?

Nearly every piece of your enrollment marketing mix—from brochures to open houses to landing pages—has the potential to be personalized. In this paper, we focus on creating a personalized student search email and SMS campaign. We break down the process to show that being like the “cool” companies is within your reach.

“These **brands feature** something that holds great promise: **personalization**.”

The Business Case for Personalized Emails

The ROI for email has been well established in consumer and other marketing spaces. According to McKinsey & Company, for example, email is 40 times more effective at acquiring new customers than Facebook or Twitter.

There's also growing evidence that personalization is critical to success. Senior marketers who increased their personalization ROI by three times in 2016 also increased their profitability, according to a **Monetate study**.

Does this hold true for communicating with Generation Z prospects? While texting and messaging apps are wildly more popular with today's teens than other generations, you might be surprised to know that 65 percent of Gen Z respondents in a **Bluecore survey** said that email was their preferred channel for brand communications.

What's more, 60 percent said that email felt more personal than other channels, and 8 percent (the next largest group) said Facebook.

email is
40x

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of Generation Z prospects say email is the most personal channel

95%

of marketers that get 3x ROI from their personalization efforts increased profitability

Personalization: True and at Scale

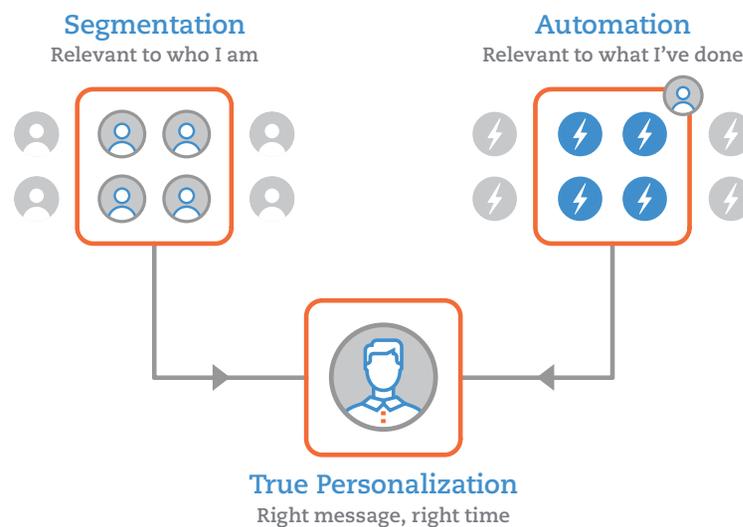
Inserting a prospect's name in a greeting and sending major-specific emails are givens for today's admissions marketers. Such tactics are easy to execute with most email marketing software.

But what happens when you go bigger? When you incorporate segmentation, dynamic content, and automation into a large search campaign? You achieve true personalization at scale. True personalization is sending relevant content in context of an action someone has taken, like submitting a request for information form.

Unlike other industries where sales cycles usually kick off when a lead enters the funnel, higher education communication cycles traditionally tie in to the admissions calendar.

Automation is changing that. Colleges and universities are now able to plan their communications in a “drip” or “lead nurture” style, based on things prospects do or don't do. For instance, if an applicant hasn't completed their application, they might receive an email or SMS encouraging them to complete their application.

Messages sent in context are more meaningful—and, well, more personal.



Start with a Plan

One thing has stayed the same as prospects' expectations and technology has evolved: solid student searches start with solid communication plans. Your plan should include audience (narrowed into segments as necessary), topic (e.g. financial aid, academic quality, general), and type (email or SMS).

Also include "when to send." This can be a calendar date, or, if you're taking a drip approach, a period of time after a person has done something. For example, the first campaign message might send immediately after someone downloads a guide on majors. The next email might go out a week later.

Many email marketing platforms feature automation tools that let you trigger messages to send by date or recipient actions. (More on that later in the paper.)

Deliverability Matters

Consult with someone on your team who's familiar with email deliverability about:



How many messages to send



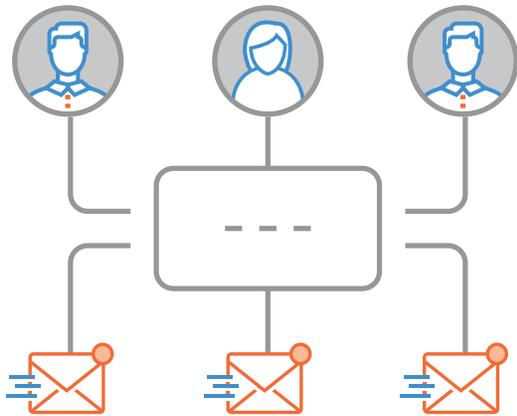
When plain text is better than HTML



Keeping your list healthy by removing non-engaged recipients (some email systems automate this)

Example Plan

This year-long student search campaign featured over 400 messages. The total figure increased as audiences were further segmented for things like household income (for aid emails), proximity to campus, application started or submitted, and admitted. “Predictive” emails are special messages sent to those who are most likely to enroll.



	 General	 Major Based	 Affordability	 Location	 Academic Quality	 Predictive
 Seniors	24 emails	2 x 9 major areas	15	4	22	4
 Parents of Seniors	19		12	4	23	
 High School Guidance Counselors	13		7	5	20	
 Sophomores + Juniors	19	1 x 9 major areas	3	5	31	4
 Parents of Sophomores + Juniors	6		4	4	28	
 Transfers	34		3	3	19	4
 Community College Counselors	25		2	3	10	

Manage the Volume of Content

The task of drafting, reviewing, editing, and approving emails for a big campaign (400+ in the example plan) would daunt a communication team of any size. And that’s only the text. Images, layouts, and build-out in an email platform require sizable effort, as well.

A low-tech first step in making the project more manageable is determining how message content will differ between audiences. For example, in an email about affordability, only a few words in the introduction sentence might be different, e.g. “you,” “your child,” “your students.” The text and link of a call-to-action button or P.S. sentence would also vary.

If we were to keep with the low-tech approach, the next step would be to write out all the emails according to matrices like the one on the right. That’s still a heck of a lot of work and plenty of painful document management. There’s a better way.

Topic: Affordability

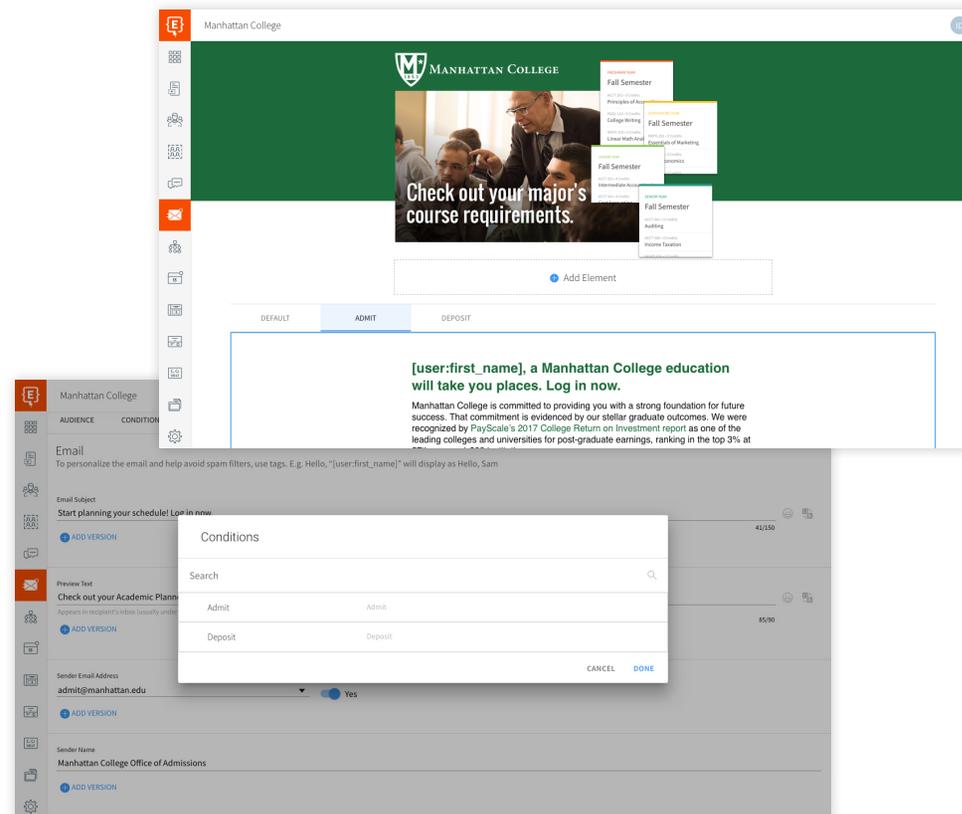
Intro Sentence Contains	Main Call-to-Action	P.S. Call-to-Action	Audience
“You”	Apply Now	Register for Open House Now	Seniors
“You”	Open House Register Now	Visit Campus	Seniors (Applicants + Admits)
“You”	Open House Register Now	Visit Campus	Sophomores + Juniors
“You”	Apply Now	Register for Open House and Transfer Decision Day	Transfers
“Your child” or “Your family”	Apply Now	Register for Open House Now	Parents of Seniors
“Your child” or “Your family”	Open House Register Now	Visit Campus	Parents of Sophomores + Juniors
“Your students”	Open House Register Now	Open House and Tour Dates	High School Counselors
“Your students”	Encourage Students to Apply		Community College Counselors

Dynamic Content Makes It Possible

To reduce the manual effort of producing digital communications, use your platform's dynamic content features. Other terms for dynamic content include “smart,” “adaptive,” “conditional.”

Dynamic content lets you send different versions of a message to many audiences by setting “variable” content such as subject lines, intro sentences, call-to-action buttons, and even images. SMS messages can use dynamic content, too. In the message builder, provide the different content that should appear for each audience segment.

For example, seniors who have started an application and live within 100 miles of campus might have a call-to-action button that reads “Schedule Visit.” Counselors who are more than 100 miles away might have one that says “Virtual Tour.”



With dynamic content, instead of building out 400+ individual help emails, you can create one email per topic that automatically displays the variable content that matches the conditions for the recipient.

For a deeper explanation of how dynamic content works, see the example at the end of the paper.

Automate the Plan

Top marketers are benefiting from automating aspects of their communication plans. **Autopilot** surveyed high performing marketers (people who reach 80 percent or more of their lead or performance goals). They found that 64 percent send automated emails to their contacts at least once per week.

Whether you use an action– or calendar-based approach, or a mixture of the two (action-based, plus things like deadline reminders or event invites), you’ll want to employ your system’s automation tools for your campaign. Doing so saves time in the long run (there’s no getting around the upfront work involved). It also invites a more strategic approach to devising your communication plan.



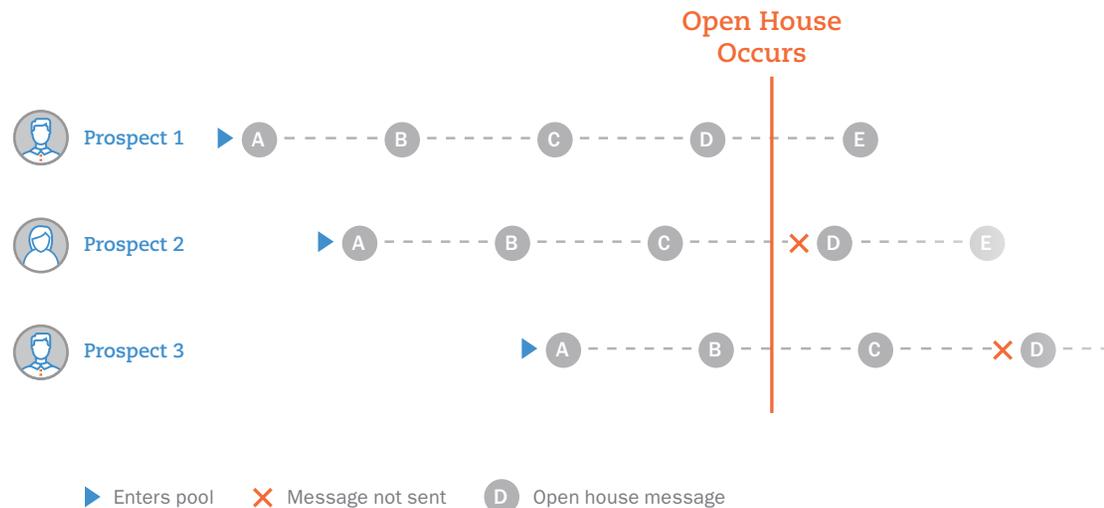
64%
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Best of Both: Action + Calendar

There's a significant downside to scheduling a search campaign by calendar alone. Consider the prospect who submits an information request in October. They enter the pool and begin receiving all scheduled messages from that point on. But they won't receive any of the emails that have already been sent. This means they could miss out on important information related to financial aid and majors that might have influenced their decision to apply.

Action-based scheduling ensures that prospects receive all the information they need. When paired with automation tools like workflows (see the end of the paper for an example) that set rules for when to send messages, you have great flexibility in customizing message sequences.

For example, take an admissions team that wants to include invites to open houses in their email series. The team would use a workflow that says not to send the invite to prospects if the event has already occurred. Prospects would still receive all other messages in the series, no matter when they enter the pool.



Summing It Up

Personalized content and context are essential to the modern admissions team's search efforts. They can increase response rates significantly. And by using audience segmentation, dynamic content, and automation, you'll deliver experiences in moments that matter. You'll also meet your audience's expectations and build stronger connections with prospective students.



Segmentation

Narrow audience groups by type, interests, demographics, etc.



Dynamic Content

Achieve more personalization with less effort



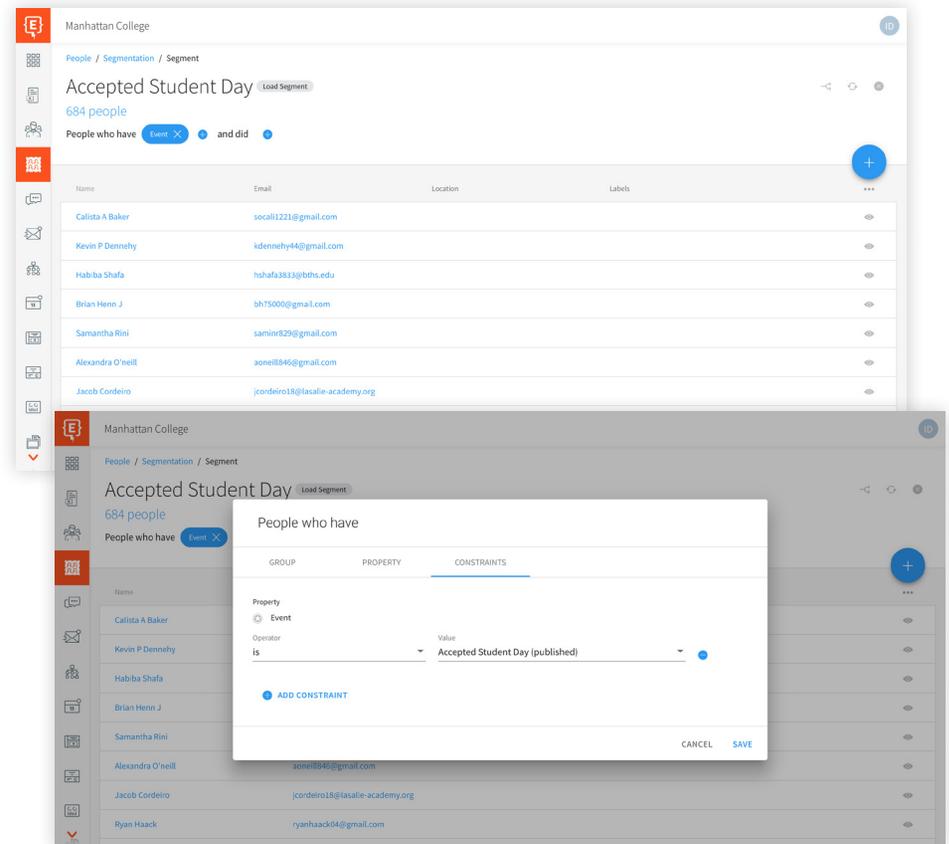
Automation

Send messages in context of recipient actions and admissions calendar

Dynamic Content Example: How It Works

To create a dynamic communication in Element451, you would first choose an audience. This is typically a segment from your pool of contacts. For example, seniors interested in engineering. Next, choose “conditions.” Conditions are like filters that narrow down the segment further. For example, seniors interested in engineering who have opened a campaign email and live within 100 miles of campus. Next, enter the content for that condition. Follow the same steps for each version of the message.

1. Select audience segment



2. Set conditions

The top screenshot shows a modal window titled "People who have" with a table for setting conditions. The table has columns for "GROUP", "PROPERTY", and "CONSTRAINTS". The "CONSTRAINTS" column is active, showing a "Property" of "Address Location", an "Operator" of "distance from", an "Address" of "451 Westbury Ave, Carle Place, NY 11514, USA", a "Count" of "At most", a "Value" of "100", and a "Unit" of "miles".

The bottom screenshot shows the "Set Conditions" interface with a list of conditions. The conditions are:

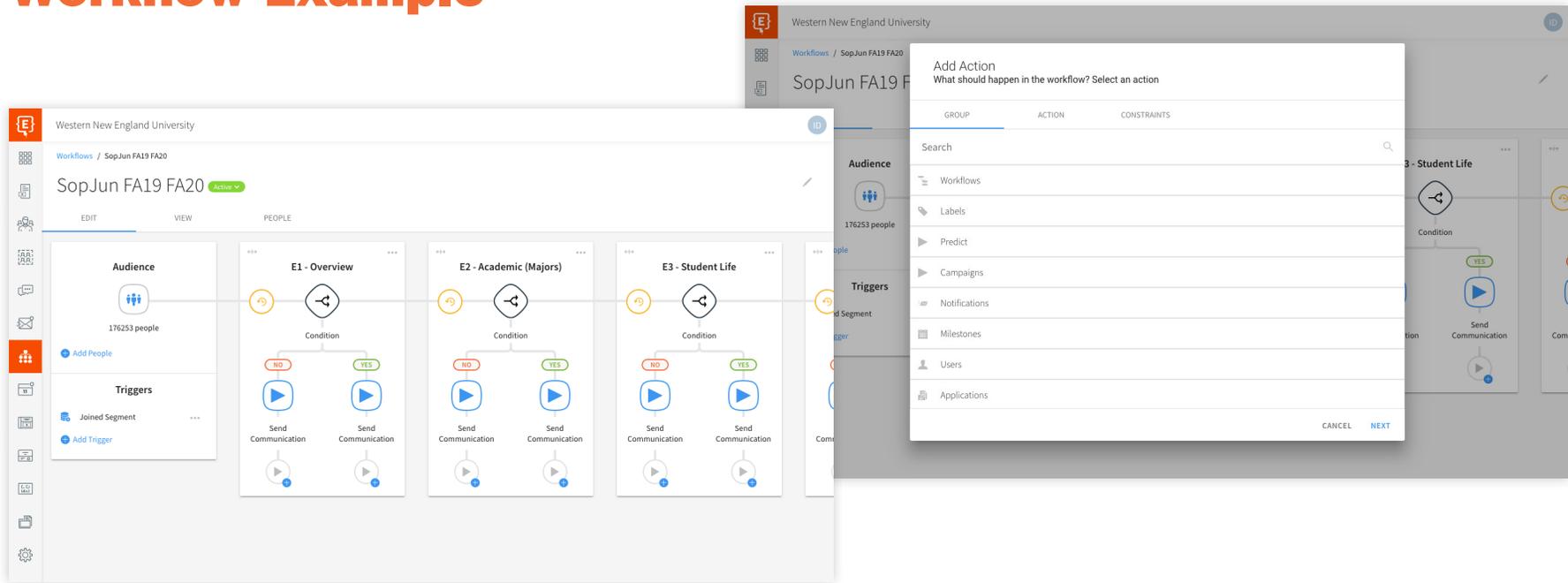
- Choose condition type: User segment
- User who has Intended Major by ID and did
- Choose condition type: User segment
- User who has Address Location and did

3. Enter content. Repeat for each version.

The top screenshot shows the "Content" setup interface for an email. The "Email" field contains the text: "To personalize the email and help avoid spam filters, use tags. E.g. Hello, [user-first_name] will display as Hello, Sam". The "Email Subject" field contains: "Start planning your schedule! Log in now." The "Preview Text" field contains: "Check out your Academic Planner, and familiarize yourself with classes for next year." The "Sender Email Address" field contains: "admit@manhattan.edu".

The bottom screenshot shows the "Content" setup for a campaign. The header image contains the text: "Check out your major's course requirements." The main text block contains: "[user-first_name], a Manhattan College education will take you places. Log in now." Below the main text block is a section for "Manhattan College is committed to providing you with a strong foundation for future success. That commitment is evidenced by our stellar graduate outcomes. We were recognized by PayScale's 2017 College Return on Investment report as one of the".

Workflow Example



Automation tools called workflows (different systems use different terminology) let you set up your communication plan as a chain of triggers and actions. Triggers are things like clicking a link to download a program guide and actions are things like sending a pre-written email.

Workflows can be as simple as sending a thank you message and as complex as a combined email and SMS campaign that spans the entire search and application process. This is an example of what workflows look like in Element451.

About the Author



Ardis Kadiu combines his extensive technology and higher education experience to lead Element451. He holds a BS in computer engineering and an MS in digital media, as well as an MBA from NYU Tandon School of Engineering. Element451 is an intelligent admissions marketing technology and CRM platform.